

MARTHA. By HENRY NORMANBY.

The stories by this writer which we have hitherto published have been powerful studies, but perhaps too sombre for all tastes. This is in a different and a lighter vein.



THE question with Martha was, not which she should accept, but which she should refuse. To say "Yes" to a lover was so entirely simple, to say "No" so completely difficult, that Martha would almost have liked to say "Yes" to both, in order to avoid it.

Of course she liked one more than the other, but what on earth had that to do with it? That didn't make it easier; on the contrary, it made it more difficult, because if she said "No" to each of them the calamity to them would, obviously, be halved; whereas to crown the one would be to doubly dispossess the other.

Paul Esling had no fear of his rival; he didn't consider him a rival—in fact, he didn't consider him at all. He had never yet been refused by a lady. They had always accepted him at sight, like a draft drawn on an honourable debtor. Martha, it is true, had not precisely flung herself into his arms, to quote the vulgar phrase, but neither, on the other hand, had he opened them invitingly wide. The flinging could come later. In the meantime it might perhaps be as well to somehow dispose of the present occupant.

The present occupant was in no hurry to be disposed of, and, of course, until Martha gave some sign there was no necessity for disposal.

The fear of Almeric Anson was pronounced. He made no attempt to disguise it, holding it rather as homage to the lady—a fine tribute to her intrinsic worth. Both were sufficiently conscious of her value—he had been poor indeed who was lacking in appreciation of so perfect a specimen of womanhood; but whereas the one feared that he was perhaps too good for her, the other, by the same token, doubted if he were good enough.

It was my good fortune to be rather greatly in her confidence—in fact, I had on several occasions suggested that a closer union yet would largely aid me in taking a more charitable view of other men's shortcomings, but Martha always answered that she liked me much too well to marry me, and with that I had to be content.

I disliked Anson from the first, possibly because he liked Martha, but I confess I should have disliked him much more if he hadn't. I knew quite well that everything he did was infinitely less than everything he didn't do. He seemed somehow to always fail first, and my constant

worry was that he didn't immediately fail with Martha. What happened at the end we must, of course, wait for the end to declare, but his continual run of non-successes filled me with apprehension lest it should arouse in Martha a successful pity.

Paul Esling I more than disliked—I loathed him. He was entirely friendly to Almeric Anson; they had fought each other in early youth, had been schoolfellows, and now were engaged in more strenuous combat. My rôle was that of spectator, with an occasional prompting of the chief actress. I knew nothing of the personal affairs of either actor at that time, save in so far as my friend was concerned; I knew how much they wanted her, just as I knew how much I myself did; still, it was not so much a question of who wanted Martha as of who Martha wanted, and this, for the life of me, I couldn't determine. She answered my inquiries with the utmost candour, almost with the utmost non-result.

"I don't see, really, why you let them hang about so much."

"You mean why I don't send them about their business," she answered smilingly.

"Or their pleasure," I went on; "one of them, at least."

"So long as they are both here I'm safe," she rejoined.

"You're safe, I take it, in any case."

"Oh, I don't know," she mused. "I'm safe with all of you together, but your strength is in your units."

When at length the suitors became importunate Martha took counsel of me as to what was to be done. Had she been disposed to adopt my finest proposition all would indeed have been well, but I was prohibited from making it, so that I made a less fine one. It was that she should appoint a term of probation, during which the siege should be raised and herself be free from attack. I suggested a year as the least possible time, and should like to have suggested a century. At the end of twelve months they might return to give an account of themselves. If either should then be deemed worthy of the prize it should unfailingly be bestowed upon him. I was empowered to offer them these large terms. When I did so Paul Esling remarked that it was a long time, to which I replied that the reward was great. Almeric Anson, on the other hand, said the time was short wherein to make one's name, whereupon I pointed out that his chance was equal to that of his fellow-competitor; furthermore, if he would have no name then, how much less would he have to-morrow?

A sense of honour annoyingly prevented my taking advantage of the absence of the probationers, and the fear was at all times mine that the most I could hope for was eventually to be "best man," which was entirely what I didn't want to be. I did not quite know whether to be pleased or hurt at not being one of the recognised wrestlers in the struggle. The fact that I was struggling hardest of all was no consolation to me.

During the probationary period I was, happily, in constant association with Martha, but she entirely prohibited all reference to the young men who had gone forth to seek the laurel wreath. I had the hope that she regarded their return as comfortingly problematical—I am sure that any-

thing short of their actual demise would not have left me too stricken, and even that conclusive bar to their acquisition of the supreme treasure could, I think, have been sufficiently met and borne. The time passed, however, without any such intervention of the Fates, and at length the appointed day was at hand. I made an attempt some days previously to ascertain what Martha's views were on the very important matter about to be decided.

"In the event of them both being equally great and charming what is to be done?" I inquired.

She considered. "Can they, do you think, be equally anything?"

"Equally desirous, assuredly," I rejoined.

"Well, we shall see; but perhaps they won't even be equally present."

"That, I'm afraid, would be too much to hope for," I permitted myself.

"Oh, hope by all means," she went on; "when you give up hope you——"

"I——?" I led her.

"You deserve to lose it," she followed.

"Suppose, then, they are each impossible?" I queried.

"Ah, we haven't arranged the stage for that."

At this moment the maid brought in a letter which Martha just glanced at and then, on a sudden impulse, handed it to me, saying, "Read it to me, please." Noticing that it was addressed in a feminine hand I drew her attention to the fact, to which she replied, "Oh, never mind. It's no one I know, so it doesn't matter—you can stop after 'Dear Madam,' if you like." I leisurely opened the missive, and was about to read it aloud when the name of one of the suitors caught my eye. An immediate inspiration came to me, and I languidly announced that Miss Wilks, having opened an establishment for dressmaking in the neighbourhood, would most carefully attend to any orders which might be entrusted to her care. "Bother dressmakers, anyhow!" I interpolated, turning to the fire to dispose summarily of Miss Wilks. It was easy to substitute a business letter of my own for the one destined to incineration. Martha did not notice the exchange.

In the austere silence of my own chamber I read the letter which Miss Wilks didn't write, and sat long into the night marvelling at the extraordinary chance which had placed fetters on Paul Esling and delivered him into my hands. The letter, I may say, contained information of such a nature as to render Esling's candidature entirely and irrevocably hopeless if its contents were divulged. My position, therefore, was decidedly embarrassing. On the one hand, to send the letter to Martha, who, after all, had the most right to it, savoured of meanness, since I alone should profit by the disclosure; on the other hand, to let him take his chance seemed to be jeopardising her future. I had, in addition, the disquieting fear that, of the three of us, Martha was most tenderly inclined towards him. After considering the matter a good deal, I decided to let Esling take his chance. The result would, I thought, easily determine my subse-

quent course. It seemed to me only fair to in no way oppose Martha's free choice. If she chose ill—well, after all, she had chosen.

It was, however, with a certain sinking of the heart that I put the letter on the fire—it seemed like throwing away my last cartridge, and this sense of unwisdom became insistent when Paul Esling presently called upon me. I almost expected to see the laurel leaves when he took off his hat; they might quite easily have been ready in his pocket. The old confident manner was even more in evidence; I had to restrain a strong inclination to step that way and do homage to his greatness. The best of the many good things about him was his fine belief in himself—in fact, I thought a little more of myself for being spoken to by him. He made not the slightest reference to Almeric Anson—I believe he had never once even thought of him. As I say, I regretted having destroyed the letter when I saw what a powerful opponent Esling had become; the improvement was apparent even to his personal appearance.

"And how, all this time, is our fair friend?" he asked. To which I answered that, obviously, Time had no power upon her—whatever else changed, Martha was changeless. He fixed me with a curious look. "You, it seems, are a great admirer of her." I made no denial that such high taste was mine. "Well, you might fitly dilute it a bit," he went on; "a fellow's wife, you know, isn't common property."

"A fellow's wife?" I inquired.

"Well, *my* wife, then!" he particularised.

"Permit me to congratulate you—I didn't know you were married; and how is the late Miss Crayling?"

It was a magnificent shot, and it took effect even at that long range. As if to complete the analogy, he turned perfectly white; then, recovering himself, unconcernedly answered, "I don't know what on earth you're talking about, and, in any case, I don't know that it's your business."

"No; your private affairs have nothing to do with me," I agreed, "except in so far as my friend is concerned; she is not, I presume, to be asked to marry a married man?"

He took up his hat as he answered, "I shall be married when she marries me, and then, I think, we will each mind our own affairs." With that he disappeared, leaving me to identify the "She."

I was just leaving the house when Anson turned up. The change in him was also tremendous, but it was in an altogether different direction. He looked exactly like a suburban collector of weekly rents.

Snood regarded me with mournful reproach as I re-entered the house with my shabby companion. I imagine he would never have got past Snood had I not been there to save him from interrogation.

In the security of my own room Anson dissolved into explanations. This time he had royally failed last. His whole year had apparently been spent in coming down from the moderate height he had attained at the commencement. It occurred to me to be thankful he had not reached a greater altitude, for assuredly any further fall would have resulted in the prompt resignation of Snood. Anson's failure had been perfect. He asked me presently if I had seen Paul Esling, and I said I had seen all of him.

"I suppose, then, he has the ace of trumps?" he continued.

"I don't know about that," I rejoined, "but he certainly has a good many tricks. Are you, by-the-bye, going on with the game?"

"Well, if I thought there was a chance——?" he began inquiringly.

"My dear fellow, you've had your chance," I reproved him; "the lady really should not be regarded as a sort of social penitentiary for the reformation of those who have not risen. Of course it's not my business, but I put it to you, don't you think the only thing to do is just not to show up?"

"Oh! I shall show up, if only to let her see how impossible I am," he replied. "Besides, if I keep quite away, she will take it as a reflection on herself."

"She will take it, I imagine, as a much brighter reflection if you don't," I answered with some heat. Playing the game was all very well, but really there were limits.

"I don't know," he continued; "she won't necessarily despise me because I'm not what you call a success."

The light was breaking, and the reason of his appearance becoming clear.

"I see. She will, you think, take pity on you?"

"Oh! I don't mean to appeal to her pity."

"To what, then?"

"She doesn't want to marry a millionaire, I presume?" he so far forgot himself.

"I don't know that she *wants* to marry anyone." I again reproved him.

"My chance is as good as Paul Esling's, anyhow," he affirmed.

"It is—quite as good."

"Very well, then, I shall show up and take it; I shall call on her at once."

"You will do, naturally, just what you please; but I shall strongly vote against you."

"*You* will vote against me! And who, then, may you be?"

"The future husband of the lady you hope to marry." He was as amazed at this as I myself was.

"Since when, may I ask, have you occupied that distinguished position?"

"Since to-morrow," I answered as I rang for Snood.

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The next morning I called on Martha. Her voice brought back the reality of things, and as she spoke I came down to earth.

"Is there any news, that you have come so early?"

"The day has come as well as I."

"Obviously; but, you know, this isn't your day."

"Oh! no; Time belongs entirely to you," I handsomely admitted; "you order the hours as you will."

"Very well, then I order that the next twelve be free of you." She smilingly sentenced me.

"To hear is to be sorry to obey," I answered; "but I'm coming very thoroughly to-morrow."

"Very thoroughly?" she wondered.

"Oh! *very* thoroughly. I'm just going to give you time to clear the way for my triumphal approach."

She again wondered. "Your triumphal approach?"

"Yes; don't you hear the drums heralding it?"

"I think I hear the brazen trumpets," she conceded.

"Bringing the captives to receive sentence," I explained. "Banishment will be very capital punishment—I recommend them to that much mercy."

"Well, I banish you first of all," she retorted; and I thought perhaps it would be better to go then.

I waited until the next afternoon before I again called; and I think something went radically wrong with Astronomical science in the meantime, or else the sun was abnormally somnolent, for I grew positively patriarchal in those fifteen hours. I was afraid to look in the mirror when I got up. Martha, curiously, seemed to have grown younger.

She said, "I have been waiting for you."

Good Heavens! Waiting for me! And I had been wandering about for hours, afraid to go in. I told her so.

"Afraid! Of what, pray?"

"Of—of myself."

"Then we're both afraid of the same person."

"*You* are afraid of me?" I marvelled.

"I've been afraid of you for more than a year," she declared.

"Afraid of what?" I asked.

"Why, afraid you would marry me before I could tell those two I wouldn't marry either of them!"

When I recovered my breath I inquired what she had said to them.

"Oh! they did all the talking; I only had to say 'No.'"

"Didn't they press for a reason?"

"No; because I gave it first."

"Were they satisfied with it?"

"Well, I can't say, but I was; and now, if you will forgive me, I'm going to give you the same one."

"Give me?" I gasped.

"Yes; I'm treating you all alike."

"What, then, in Heaven's name, is it?"

"Well, you see, I told each of them that I could not marry him because I am going to marry you; and now perhaps you will tell me why you read the letter that wasn't written to me?"

When she recovered *her* breath I asked her how she knew I read the wrong letter.

"Simply because I had had a previous one from the same person. I wanted you to read it so that you might save me from the unpleasant interview I had yesterday—but I'm glad you didn't use it as a weapon. You were quite safe, you know, from the first."